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SUBJECT: LECTURE AFFORDS SNAPSHOT OF BAHAMAS MUSLIM
COMMUNITY, PAST AND PRESENT

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¶11. (U) SUMMARY: During a recent lecture at the historical society, a prominent local Muslim leader presented a largely autobiographical and documentary overview of the origins and development of Islam in The Bahamas. He provided an eyewitness perspective on a growing minority religion whose adherents normally keep a very low profile. He told the story of a small but persistent group of early Bahamian converts strongly influenced by the U.S.-based Nation of Islam, with longstanding links to South Asian Islam through expatriate influence in the 1970s and educational travel beginning in the 1980s. In a far more revealing discussion, the speaker and other local Muslims answered audience members' questions on the Islamic religion and local community, and distributed published material. They took exception to 'incorrect perceptions' of Islam and "Islamic fundamentalism" in the Western media and blandly repeated standard grievances against U.S. foreign policy and the treatment of Muslims throughout the world. Several explained their commitment to living by secular laws amidst the challenges of living as a minority in a Western society. Looking back over the previous 40-odd years of Islam in The Bahamas, they foresaw better times ahead. END SUMMARY.

AN AMERICAN STORY: FROM BLACK MUSLIM TO BAHAMIAN MUSLIM

¶12. (U) A lecture on "The History of Islam in The Bahamas" was held at the local historical society January 22 and attended by some 25 people (a larger than average crowd for such academic topics), including 7-8 Muslim men and one woman. The featured speaker was Dr. Munir Ahmad Rashad, a soft-spoken and self-effacing, American-trained dentist and respected health professional, who also moonlights as a boxing official. Dr. Rashad highlighted some historical indications that the majority of black Bahamians' forebears were likely Muslims before being enslaved in the New World, but he concentrated on a largely autobiographical account of the development of the Islamic community in Nassau and New Providence. Dr. Rashad became a Muslim in 1971 after studying dentistry in the U.S., where he joined the Nation of Islam of Elijah Muhammad. He told the story from a personal perspective, beginning as a student in Louisiana in the 1960s, as a convert to Islam who returned to Nassau planning to expand the Nation of Islam in The Bahamas and the Caribbean.

¶13. (U) Dr. Rashad painted a picture of Bahamian Islam as essentially an offshoot of American Islam of the 1960s, with the local community first known as "Jamaat-ul-Islam, the Revolutionary Islaamic Movement of The Bahamas", before dropping the revolutionary appellation later under South Asian Sunni influences. Most early adherents were students in the U.S. or the U.K. when they first encountered Islam, some later marrying women from Muslim countries. Dr. Rashad's talk was sprinkled with American references and connections. For example, he said that he had first heard of Islam when Muhammad Ali was stripped of his title for refusing to enlist during Vietnam. Dr. Rashad told PolOff

that he had met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama as a student through personal connections. He also said that he had traveled to Washington for President Obama's inauguration earlier in the week, where he did not even catch a glimpse of the President. COMMENT: The community still lists "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" as suggested reading in a promotional pamphlet titled "Islaam for The Bahamas".
END COMMENT.

INDIA, PAKISTAN CONNECTIONS KEY FOR RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT ...

¶4. (U) According Dr. Rashad and source material he provided, the small Islamic community in The Bahamas developed in fits and starts in the late 1970s, mostly under South Indian expatriate Islamic influences, because they lacked formally trained leaders or international contacts. A Bangladeshi pathologist working at the local public hospital and then a Pakistani teacher played particularly prominent roles, according to Dr. Rashad, in guiding the community toward a more mainstream Islamic affiliation than that inspired by the Nation of Islam. Some members traveled to the U.S. and India in the 1980s to network and study under the auspices of the Indian-based Jamaat Tabligh. Some also received more formal training in Guyana, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia subsequently, including at the university level. The early activists bought a parcel of land in western New Providence in 1982 and formally constituted the community under law in 1990. The local mosque, still under construction, is an impressive white edifice with small domes and a minaret.

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... OF SMALL, GROWING COMMUNITY

¶5. (U) Dr. Rashad noted that there was now a Muslim community in Freeport and individual families living in Abaco and Exuma. He said that the community hoped to expand further through their social work and outreach, and was working to found a school. Dr. Rashad and others in attendance, apparently, had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Dr. Rashad said that the Muslim population in The Bahamas was "less than 1 percent", e.g. less than 3,000 people. He said that the Muslim community was not active in the prison, though it had worked at youth detention centers, occasionally assisted foreign Muslims detained for immigration violations, and actively proselytized as part of their faith requirements. Pamphlets and informational handouts were available at the lecture. Notably, the leader of the local Islamic community said that, despite the negative attention to Islam and closer scrutiny of Muslims after 9/11, more young people and converts approached the local community in the aftermath of 9/11 than previously.

DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS GRIEVANCES, FUNDAMENTALISM, 9/11

¶6. (U) Dr. Rashad and other local Muslims in attendance engaged with audience members, a mix of young and old, black and white, Muslim and non-Muslim, history buffs and not, answering questions and painting a picture of a moderate local Islamic community sharing many concerns with Bahamians overall. All speakers took issue with coverage of Islam and "Islamic fundamentalism" in the Bahamian and Western media, however, which they saw as fostering incorrect perceptions. They briefly voiced some standard Muslim grievances against U.S. foreign policy, for example in Gaza and Israel, and the treatment of Muslims throughout the world, especially after 9/11. They did not venture into controversial details or extreme or objectionable rhetoric, with the leader of the local Islamic community venturing that it was the lot of Muslims to suffer.

¶7. (U) One young man offered a spirited explanation of the basic tenets of Islam, characterizing fundamentalism as

adherence to fundamentals of the faith such as daily prayers, and concluded that "extremism" was a better description of the negative phenomena associated with Islam in the media. He said that some Muslims wrongly "took matters into their own hands" instead of allowing "the Creator" to dispense justice for earthly woes. Arguments over the distinction between "true Islam" and "Islamic fundamentalism", or terrorism in the name of Islam, were not particularly sophisticated or convincing. The topics of community financing, internal organization, or the role of women, notably, were not addressed in the remarks or discussion, with the exception of male leadership changes over the years.

¶18. (SBU) The leader of the local Islamic community, Faisal AbdurRahmaan Hepburn, complained in great detail about his treatment at the hands of U.S. immigration authorities during three separate encounters in the early 2000s, at each of which his valid U.S. visa was cancelled. He later showed PolOff three visas in his passport, issued from 2001-2003, each apparently cancelled, two "without prejudice" and one with extensive, illegible notations apparently done in Miami when he was sent back to The Bahamas, which he considered an inexplicable injustice as he had already passed CBP pre-clearance in Nassau.

A MUSLIM TAKE ON BAHAMIAN SOCIETY, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

¶19. (U) During the lively discussion, which lasted much longer than the actual presentation, several Muslims in attendance reacted to questioners and explained their commitment to living by the secular laws of the land, despite their grievances and the everyday challenges of living as a minority in a Western society, such as non-sectarian education for the young. They rejected sharia law as impractical in a majority-Christian setting lacking an Islamic tradition. One young man expressed admiration for the strictness of criminal penalties in Saudi Arabia (having traveled there), in particular the death penalty for drug traffickers. He said the crime problem in The Bahamas (reftel) would look much different if such penalties were applied, drawing knowing nods and murmurs from some in the audience. COMMENT: While legal in The Bahamas, the application of the death penalty is a hot topic in The Bahamas in the face of a spike in violent crime. END COMMENT.

¶110. (U) Published material discussed and distributed at the lecture revealed not only the community's organizational growing pains but its attempt to play a positive social role, especially in the struggle with crime and social breakdown.

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PolOff acquired a small notebook documenting the history of the Islamic community in The Bahamas, including an official statement on crime and social issues presented to the government as far back as 1995. This document, titled "Recommendations for Crime and Punishment in the Bahamian Society", generally would not be out of place in current public debates about how society and government ought to respond to worrying levels of crime and violence (reftel). A more recent, undated document also shows the community's grappling with post-9/11 issues of integration into society in the shadow of worldwide Islamic terrorism. The document lists childcare, including education, family life, specifically its decline, and terrorism as the three key concerns.

TYPICALLY CONFLICTED STATEMENT ON TERRORISM

¶111. (U) "We reject terrorism because it is against the tenets of Islam," the document states, and strongly condemns the attacks of September 11, 2001. It continues, "however we strongly believe that the Western world itself is to blame for the events resulting from its unjust policy toward the Muslim world for more than a century." Grievances include

"the Israeli occupation of Palestine, distortion of Islamic teachings, support for aggressive forces and use of international organizations against Muslims among other things." The document goes on to decry "examples of injustice and rank prejudices" and the "generally biased attitude of the West at the official and medial (sic) levels against Muslims and Islamic charitable institutions and associations." It calls on Muslims in the West to adhere to their religion, to persevere in spreading Islam, and to explain legitimate issues and defend their communities. "We should work for bridging the gap between words and actions, between precept and practice, in the country where we live."

COMMENT

¶12. (U) The Muslim community in The Bahamas is small and claims to be growing, but is not influential in a society strongly dominated by Christian denominations. That said, it may be much larger than other non-Christian groups, such as the Jewish community. Despite their distinctive dress and appearance, the community normally keeps a low profile. The Muslim community appears focused inward, for example on raising their children in keeping with the tenets of their faith, while conducting some social outreach and proselytizing. They agreed to have the lecture videotaped and posted on the web-site of the historical society, according to the usual practice (though it was not done as of this writing). The leaders of the community appeared resigned but not discouraged by the negative attention to Islam and closer scrutiny of Muslims after 9/11. Looking back over the previous 40-odd years of Islam in The Bahamas, they seemed to feel that better times were ahead.

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